Politics Rides the Air

By Franz Allina

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NEW POLITICAL VOICES can be heard amid the cool commercials for candidates and the clamor for broadcast debates and equal air time. The new voices belong to stations stumping for and against candidates.

A disendorsement by one group of stations preceded President Johnson's disannouncement of March 31. Audiences in Texas, California, Chicago, Buffalo and Detroit heard the seven stations of the McLendon group belt the President: "All the way with LBJ. All the way down. . . . President Johnson deserves a crashing defeat in this election."

By election day, about 250 stations will have formally endorsed candidates in local and state races across the country. Many are siding in U.S. Senate contests—Javits vs. O'Dwyer in New York, Dirksen vs. Clark in Illinois and Cranston vs. Rafferty in California, among others.

A few are endorsing in the presidential election. WWLP-TV in Springfield, Mass., has likened Wallace to Hitler, hesitantly backed Humphrey and suggested Mad magazine's Alfred E. Neuman for County Commissioner ("a ridiculous job, which should be abolished").

Still a Minority

THE ENDORSERS are still a minority of the Nation's 5500 radio and 500-plus television stations. But they include influential voices in practically every major city. Washington willing, more stations would offer election advice.

Network television's campaign coverage has helped loosen the grip of machine politicans by reducing their capacity to deliver the vote in national elections. Similarly, political advocacy on the part of local stations could well hasten the decline of the old municipal, state and congressional politics.

Should broadcasters be partisans? A few years ago, when Los Angeles station KNXT endorsed a protege of Gov. Edmund (Pat) Brown for a city school board seat, the Governor congratulated the station manager on "the finest use of a TV facility I've ever heard of." In 1966, however, when KNXT supported Ronald Reagan's successful bid to unseat him, Brown called it "one of the most dangerous things that has ever happened in the United States" and predicted that someday station endorsements would be outlawed.

But criticism of station partisanship comes from others besides spurned candidates. Federal Communications Commissioner Nicholas Johnson warned recently that some of the owners of big city television stations already have "national political power . . . greater than a democracy should unthinkingly repose in one man or corporation."

Rep. John Moss (D-Calif.), whose bill to ban station endorsements was recently killed in committee, has said that broadcast partisanship has become "definitely dangerous since September," when a Federal court in Chicago eased restraints on politicking by stations.

Until the September court decision, the FCC regulated partisanship among broadcasters with a broad policy known as the fairness doctrine, together with a set of rules based on that doctrine. The fairness doctrine, which the Chicago court left standing, requires stations to balance everything controversial they air by providing opportunities "for the presentation of contrasting views." Under the more specific rules, which the court knocked down, endorsing stations had to give unfavored candidates or their representatives a chance to reply in person.

The Chicago court uanimously found that these "attack" and "endorsement" rules promote "rigorous self-censorship" and "blandness" on the air and "collide with the free speech and press guarantees of the First Amendment."

Rep. Moss's condemnation of the Chicago decision as 'naive" and wrong is part of a broader confrontation between the Government and the broadcasters. In August, Congress was livid over the coverage of the Chicago convention. In September, the networks were in Washington answering charges about the tie between violence on the screen and in the streets. This winter, a group of broadcasters will argue before the Supreme Court that the fairness doctrine itself violates the First Amendment.

This confrontation is being sharpened by increasing awareness of the broadcasters' potential political influence. Sen. Charles Percy has told the manager of WBBM-TV, Chicago, that the station's endorsement in 1966 "was worth ten from Chicago's American," the newspaper.

Ralph Renick, news director of WTVJ, Miami, which often crusades on nonpolitical issues, senses the same influence. But it frightens him off: "TV is intimate, personal, powerful. We're not omniscient about how any candidate would perform in office. Forecasting is too risky."

Established politicians are especially apt to see the Orwellian peril in broadcasting. Endorsements cut into the advantages which their offices give incumbents over challengers, evening the odds between "ins" and "outs."

Complaints about endorsements—and threats to ban them—come mostly from the House of Representatives. The two-year House term forces members in unsafe districts to campaign almost continuously, and many House districts are small enough for a single station to swing real influence.

Two weeks before the 1966 election, noting that eight of the 12 stations owned by CBS had backed candidates, the chairman of the House Commerce Committee threatened an investigation because "the power of radio and television . . . endorsing . . . has caused

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considerable concern among members of Congress in both parties." The chairmen of the House Judiciary Committee and the Communications Subcommittee asserted flatly that station endorsements are illegal.

Speaker John McCormack's office said then that he "feels very strongly" against radio and TV endorsements. Earlier in October, Boston radio station WEEI had supported Massachusetts Republican Gov. John Volpe over Edward McCormack, the Speaker's nephew, whom Volpe ultimately defeated.

Within days, CBS President Frank Stanton fired back: the FCC allows stations to "stand up and be counted" on issues by airing editorials. Elected officials are supposed to deal with issues. Therefore, the right of a station to back candidates for office "cannot be separated from the right to take positions on issues."

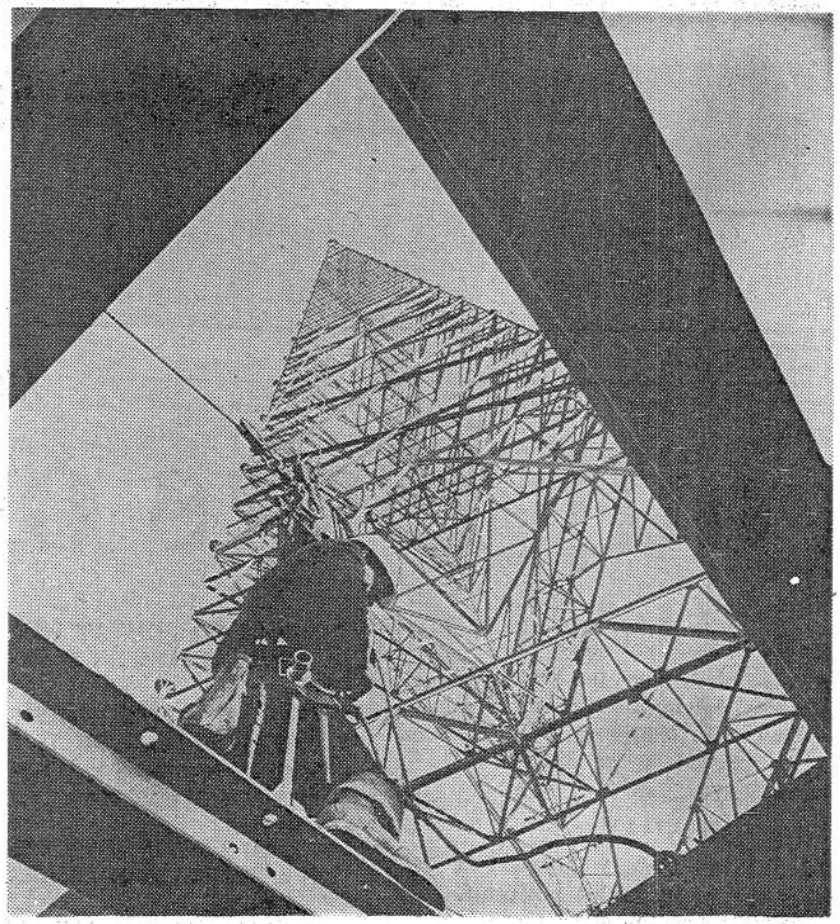
The CBS stations are suiting their deeds to the Stanton logic. This year, more—possibly all 12—will endorse in races for local, state and Federal offices (but not the Presidency).

The broadcasters, however, are not about to turn 1968 into 1984. For one thing, most station endorsements are made at well under full strength.

Most broadcasters try to keep politics at arm's length—even while endorsing. CBS corporate headquarters in New York, for example, does not tell the managers of its stations around the country which races they should endorse in or which side to pick.

This year, however, there is considerable consistency in endorsements by CBS-owned radio and television "sister" stations in the same cities. In New York City, the radio and TV stations have both endorsed incumbent Republican Sen. Jacob Javits; both Chicago stations have backed incumbent Republican Sen. Everett M. Dirksen, and the Los Angeles TV and San Francisco radio stations have each supported Democrat Alan Cranston over Republican Max Rafferty.

The pattern provides a contrast to 1966, when the two Chicago CBS stations split between Percy and Paul Douglas for the Senate and California's CBS stations split two for Reagan, one for Brown in the gubernatorial race.



By Douglas Chevalier—The Washington Post

With exceptions like the anti-Johnson McLendon chain, local autonomy is the industry pattern. Some CBS stations don't even notify the head office whom they have selected until they have notified the candidates involved.

Broadcasters' Reluctance

IN ANY CASE, most broadcasters are not at all eager to sock it to the electorate. Fear—more of Congress than the FCC—is one reason. Rep. Lionel Van Deerlin (D-Calif.), a former TV news director, says that "just by considering bans on station partisanship, Congress frightens lots of broadcasters half to death."

But most broadcasters are even less afraid than they are apolitical. "Look," one nonendorser says, "I own a moving company, too. Should *it* endorse candidates?" A Tennessee station which once endorsed found "it was a mistake—the audience didn't like our guy. Any time the audience doesn't like what you do, it's a mistake."

For whatever reason, many broadcasters hesitate to bite the political bullet—and many politicans hate it when they do. But the Chicago court which knocked down the "attack" and "endorsement" rules said in effect that the pleasure of Congress—and many broadcasters' preference for keeping their heads down—are irrelevant.

The Government may not inhibit station partisanship, the court declared. Restraints that tend to neutralize or eliminate "points of view on controversial issues and political candidates" jeopardize the job of "the broadcast press in influencing public opinion and exposing public ills." In short, stations should feel free to stump for candidates or help throw rascals out.